

# PROFESSIONAL FORUM



## The Bulge: A Remembrance

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On the morning of 20 December 1944, I was a first lieutenant commanding Company L, 334th Infantry Regiment, 84th Infantry Division. For the past month we had been in almost continuous action as part of the U.S. XIII Corps, Ninth U.S. Army, in and around the North German towns of Prummern, Beeck, Wurm, and Lindern. (For part of that month, we were under the operational control of the British XXX Corps, then commanded by Lieutenant General Brian Horrocks.) Our primary objective from the beginning was the Roer River, and we were getting close to it despite strong German resistance and miserable weather conditions.

I had been told the previous evening that our battalion—the 3d Battalion—was being pulled out of the lines for a short stay at the division's rest center at Eygelshoven, a small Dutch town that lay just across the border some 10 or 12 miles from our present location. I had also been told that my mess crew and its equipment was going there right after it had delivered a hot breakfast on the 20th, and that I could expect a number of two-and-a-half-ton trucks to reach me shortly after the mess crew departed. These trucks would take my company to Eygelshoven, at which time I would release them to their parent unit. (If I remember correctly, these trucks belonged to a Quarter-

master truck company, one of several such units then supporting the division.)

My mess crew arrived with our hot breakfast early on 20 December and left about an hour later. The mess sergeant and I talked about his going to Eygelshoven, and he promised he would have a good meal ready for us when we got there about noon.

At about 0900 the trucks arrived and I soon had the company loaded and ready to go. As we pulled out to become part of the battalion's convoy, my soldiers were in good spirits, thinking ahead to several days in warm, dry billets among a civilian populace that really seemed to care for them.

We did not reach Eygelshoven that morning. (We did get there eventually, but much later—February 1945.) I did not know at the time, but shortly after we started out the battalion commander received orders to head for Aachen, which lay in the opposite direction.

When we reached Aachen we were told we were going to Belgium, but where in Belgium no one seemed to know. Why we were going was another unanswered question. My main concern was for my mess crew: I kept wondering if the mess sergeant had been told about the change in plans, and whether I would ever see my cooks again.

I don't think anyone in the convoy that

day had any idea of the extent of the German breakthrough, or what steps were being taken to counter it. (We found out much later that we had followed the 7th Armored Division, another Ninth Army unit, to Belgium. We did run across some of that division's rear echelon units, but never encountered any of its combat elements.)

We paused for a short break in Liege, where I had to turn over to the MPs a truckload of my soldiers who were designated to serve as guides along the way to our final destination. We still did not know where that was, and I screamed and hollered about giving up my soldiers, but lost the argument. With the way things were going, and with so little information, I feared I would never see those men again—the same fear I had about my mess crew. (The soldiers did get to me in the next few days, seemingly none the worse for their experiences.)

From Liege we headed almost due south and reached the town of Marche early in the evening. (It seems to me that we traveled almost 130 miles.) We were ordered off the trucks and into defensive positions on the outskirts of the town. We had no maps of the area, we did not know where the Germans were, and we did not know what we were expected to do. We knew there were other U.S. units around but did not know where they were. A 7th

Armored Division aid station was just closing down and leaving, but the medical personnel could tell us little about the situation.

Two days later my company was defending a three-mile front that ran from one small Belgian town—Marenne—to another equally small one—Menil. We weren't sure who was on our left, but a sister company was on our right, across a small valley, in the town of Verdenne. It, too, had a wide front to defend.

I kept one platoon in town with me, plus a platoon of tank destroyers that had been sent up by someone in the rear. My other two rifle platoons occupied strong points along a wooded ridge that ran almost to Menil. They used foot patrols to keep in touch with each other, with me, and eventually with a U.S. unit that appeared in Menil. We also had wire communications with each other, but we could communicate with battalion headquarters only by radio.

We did know we had one heck of a lot of artillery in support and were told to call for it on the slightest German provocation. That we did, in a big way, even when one German force broke through the Verdenne defenders and circled to our rear. There it stayed in a wooded area about 1,000 yards away until the day after Christmas. Actually, that German unit's advance had been halted by our battalion's reserve company and by other companies from the regiment that had been fed into the fight. The only thing we knew for certain, however, was that we were to stay where we were as long as we could.

We received a welcome surprise early on 26 December when our mess crew arrived with a Christmas dinner, which featured turkey and all the trimmings. (Well, almost all of them!) My mess sergeant told me he had been trying to get in touch with me for several days, but had not been able to do so. He had finally found a back road into Marenne that skirted the German force in our rear, and had received permission from battalion to try to get to us with some hot food. He and his crew were a most welcome sight, and the platoon carrying parties were soon on their way to pick up their share of the food.

Unfortunately, before we could distribute the food, and before the carrying parties arrived, I was told by the leader of the platoon I had kept in town that the German force that had been in our rear was now coming in our direction, down the valley between Marenne and Verdenne. It was still early in the morning, and he told me that while he could not make out the German vehicles, he was sure—from the sound of their engines and the noise their tracks were making—that they were headed for our town.

I instructed him to pull his "daisy chains" (antitank mines tied together) across the street (there was only one in town), and I alerted the tank destroyer platoon leader to get his vehicles cranked up to take on the approaching German armor. From what information I had, I assumed we still had some time before the Germans came in. It was a sizable force headed our way. I knew because we had been dueling with those people for the past several days.

I was sadly mistaken about how much time we had; I had no sooner finished talking with the tank destroyer commander than the lead German vehicles were coming down the street. Apparently, my platoon had not been able to place its mines across the roadway, and the

tank destroyers were now practically helpless, since each was in a separate building and not prepared to fight.

Our few bazooka rounds bounced harmlessly off the side of the lead German tank, which was a monster, so I did the only thing I could: I called for an artillery concentration right on top of us. Fortunately, we had plotted just such a concentration, thinking we might need it at a future date. I had some difficulty convincing the artillery liaison officer at battalion headquarters that I knew what I was doing, but he finally approved the shoot.

I managed to get word to my other two platoons as to what was happening in Marenne, and told the farthest one out to alert the U.S. unit it had made contact with in Menil. I ordered the nearest one to take up positions on the west edge of town where it might pick off any German stragglers, but I warned the platoon leader about the concentration that was about to come in. Those of us still in town headed for cellars.

I don't know how many artillery battalions fired that concentration for us, but there must have been quite a few. Any German soldiers and vehicles that did not see their end in Marenne fled the town, only to be mopped up by my two platoons



U.S. infantrymen of the 84th Division in the Battle of the Bulge. Units of the division are supporting troops crippled by the German counterthrust, 4 January 1945.

and the unit in Menil. Unfortunately, I think we took the second stories off most of the houses in Marenne and deposited them in the street.

But I came up out of my cellar grinning from ear to ear and very happy to be alive. So were the few men I still had with me, including the mess crew, none of whom had ever been through anything like this. To our sorrow, though, we saw that a German tank had flattened the trail-er that held our Christmas meal.

My company was relieved several days later, and we moved to a reserve position, strangely enough in what was left of Verdun, the town just across the valley, although it took us several days and lots of walking in what seemed to be circles to get there.

Still later, beginning on 3 January 1945 in a driving blizzard, our battalion was committed as part of a large U.S. coun-

terattacking force (the VII Corps) to close the bulge the Germans had driven in our lines. (Three days later, I was lying in a roadside ditch trying to hide from the effects of a German artillery bombardment that was shredding the tops of the trees that bordered the ditch and covered the surrounding hills and valleys. My radio operator, just behind me, tugged on one of my boots. When I turned toward him, he motioned that I had a call on the radio, which was on the battalion command net. I inched back to him, reached for the mike, and gave my call sign. Our battalion S-1 was on the other end. He said he just wanted to let me know that Headquarters First Army had just approved a battlefield promotion to captain for me, effective 4 January. Rather sarcastically, I suppose, I accepted the news, which was the last thing I needed to hear at the time, and asked him to get me a

set of captain's bars for when and if I ever got out of that ditch alive!)

We took part in the rest of the so-called Battle of the Bulge and ended our stint in Belgium in late January in the small town of Beho. (I don't remember when I got my bars.)

In early February, we finally made it to Eygelshoven and those warm, dry billets. And for those of us who were left—there weren't many—it was good to be home.

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# Checkpoint/Roadblock Operations

MAJOR MARTIN N. STANTON

Among the most common tactical operations that are conducted in peace enforcement and humanitarian relief operations are checkpoint and roadblock operations—both at the bivouac sites of U.S. Army personnel and at mission critical installations such as headquarters, trains and logistical areas, airfields, or food distribution sites. In the deployment of Somalia, this has been true not only for the U.S. Army elements but for U.N. operations as well.

Checkpoints normally serve the dual purpose of screening the traffic passing through and presenting a barrier to hostile forces. They must be exposed and clearly visible, and the personnel manning them must have access to covered and concealed positions and enough firepower to react to fast-developing situations.

The following are some of the principles developed by the 2d Battalion, 87th Infantry, for these operations, many of which were used during the battalion's deployment to Somalia.

**Personnel and Equipment.** A checkpoint should not be manned by a unit less than fire-team size (four or five men, including a noncommissioned officer). Although a squad-size unit allows for multiple automatic weapons and the ability to inspect more vehicles and groups of people, the number of checkpoints or missions assigned to a company may preclude the use of a squad.

Each checkpoint should have at least one automatic weapon and one grenade launcher. The checkpoint element should also have AT-4 antiarmor weapons readily accessible for firing on short notice and claymore mines positioned to

cover the roadblock. For communications equipment, the checkpoint should have both wire and FM radio communications with the site command post. The checkpoint should also have zeroed night observation devices for all weapons, including a Dragon night sight, if possible, along with at least one pair of binoculars. If interpreters are available, they should be prepared to come to the roadblock on short notice.

**Positioning of Personnel.** A checkpoint should be at least 150 to 200 meters from the installation it is guarding. Most of the checkpoint personnel should be at least 50 meters from the position where vehicles and personnel are actually halted, and some should be in a position within 20 meters that allows one of its occupants to move forward and inspect vehicles or groups of people and then